



Teshuva: A Counter-Cultural Endeavor Rabba Claudia Marbach

Class of 2018

Teshuva seems counter cultural at this moment in time. We live in a time where public figures are accused of wrongdoing, apologize (maybe), go quiet for a bit, and then resume their careers as before. Some lose their jobs but find others, and others skip the apology stage altogether and carry on as before. Given this context, how do we approach our teshuva this year? Our calendar seems to be out of sync with the world.

A mishna in Masechet Yoma (8:9) aptly describes some of the kinds of non-teshuva that we are seeing:

הָאוֹמֵר, אָחַטָא וְאָשׁוּב, אִין מְסַפֵּיקִין בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה

One who says: I shall sin and repent, sin and repent, they do not afford him the opportunity to repent.

The mishna presents a lackadaisical stance to teshuva. I do things and then I will repent, and then repeat the whole scenario again. The actor in the mishna has some self-awareness to recognize a pattern, but that is as far as she goes. The regret part and the acknowledgement of having done harm or wrongdoing is not of concern to this 'repenter'. The Hebrew emphasizes this lack of depth of reflection with the phrase אִין מְסַפֵּיקִין -- literally translated as 'there is not enough in his hand with which to do teshuva.' The mishna is telling us that one needs resources to do teshuva. One needs something in one's hand to have the resolve to go against one's habitual behavior.

How do we fill our hands enough to do the work of teshuva when it goes against our moment in time? How do we gather the strength to be counter cultural?

One way in which we gain strength is by coming together at this time of year. We gather to say selichot and hear the shofar. We gather as families to celebrate the holidays. The communal nature of our teshuva enables us to create a different culture in our synagogues. The source of this instinct to gather for this purpose comes from Parashat Kedoshim, when Hashem tells us to be holy (Vayikra 19:2):

דַּבֵּר אֶל כָּל עַדְת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תְּהִיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם:

Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy.

The Chatam Sofer says on that pasuk:

לא קדושה של התבודדות ומזירות דורשת התורה, אלא, אדרבא קדושים בהקהל נאמרה -
היו קדושים בהיותכם בתוך קהל ועדה ומעורבים עם הבריות.

The Torah seeks not the holiness of solitary worship or Nazarite self-denial, rather the opposite, be holy in community - be holy when you are part of a congregation and a community and involved with God's creations.

We gain the strength to be holy when we come together both in prayer and in community.

Rambam, in Hilchot Teshuva (2:6), focuses on the communal aspect of teshuva:

אף על פי שהתשובה והצעקה יפה לעולם, בעשרה הימים שבין ראש השנה ויום הכפורים היא יפה ביותר ומתקבלת היא מיד שנאמר (ישעיה נה-ו) "דרשו ה' בהמצאו". במה דברים אמורים? ביחיד אבל צבור כל זמן שעושים תשובה וצועקים בלב שלם הם נענין שנאמר (דברים ד-ז) "פה א-לקינו בכל קראנו אליו".

Even though teshuva and crying out are desirable all year, on the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, they are more desirable, and are immediately received, as it says (Isaiah 55:6): "Seek out God while He may be found. [Call to him while He is close]." This is talking about someone who is doing teshuva alone. But whenever a community (*tzibur*) is doing teshuva and crying out with a full heart, they are answered, as it says (Devarim 4:7): [For what great nation is there, that has God so near to them] as the Lord our God whenever we call to Him."

In other words, teshuva on your own is a good thing to do, but teshuva in community brings us to the fullness of our mission. The Beit haLevi on Mishpatim explains our pledge at Sinai of *na'aseh v'nishma* (we will do and we will say) as follows:

לכל אחד לומר כל אשר דבר ה' אעשה והם אמרו בלשון רבים נעשה משום דכל אחד קיבל שתי קבלות, א' שהוא בעצמו יקיים התורה, וגם קיבל עליו להשגיח בחבירו שגם חבירו יקיימנה ולא יניחנו לעבור עליה
Each person should have said, "Everything that God said, I will do." But instead they answered in the plural because each person accepted two obligations -- first, that each individual would himself keep the mitzvot, and second, that each person would oversee that their fellows would keep the mitzvot.

Our tefillot are explicit about the importance of community, from the plural language of the *Al Chet* to the explicit statement in Kol Nidre:

על דעת המקום ועל דעת הקהל, אנו מתירים להתפלל עם העבריינים
With the knowledge of God and the knowledge of the community, we hereby declare it permissible to pray with those who have gone astray.

In a time when we feel divided and alone, the call to teshuva is a call to come together -- everyone included. In a time when people feel more lonely than ever, we congregate in order to do teshuva.

Physically coming together to pray not only gives us the strength to "fill our hands" enough to do teshuva, but also enables us to reach out to each other and build community. The Talmud tells us, in Yoma 9b, that the Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred. The harsh punishment of destruction and exile was based on the breakdown of civility and caring for one another.

According to the midrash Avot d'Rebbe Natan (4:5) chessed is a key aspect of teshuva, citing the following story:

פעם אחת היה רבן יוחנן בן זכאי יוצא מירושלים והיה רבי יהושע הולך אחריו וראה בית המקדש חרב [אר"י אוי לנו על זה שהוא חרב] מקום שמכפרים בו עונותיהם של ישראל. א"ל בני אל ירע לך יש לנו כפרה אחת שהיא כמותה ואיזה זה גמילות חסדים.

Once Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was walking from Jerusalem with his student Rabbi Yehoshua. They saw the ruins of the Temple and Rabbi Yehoshua said "Woe to us,



that this place where the sins of Israel were atoned for is destroyed.” Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai answered, “My son, do not fear. We have another atonement which replaces it: gemilut chasadim, deeds of lovingkindness.”

Atonement requires chessed. We need to engage with others, and see the consequences of our deeds and their impact on others. Psychologists tell us that helping others makes us happier and helps us forge deeper meaning in our lives.¹ Gemilut Chasadim gives us the resources to “fill our hands” sufficiently to do teshuva.

The benefits of Gemilut Chasadim go beyond the personal, as Yoma 86a tells us:

א"ר חמא (בר) חנינא גדולה תשובה שמביאה רפאות לעולם שנא' (הושע י"ד, ה) ארפא משובתם אוהבם נדבה
Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said: Great is repentance, as it brings healing to the world,
as it is stated: “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely” (Hosea 14:5).

Our teshuva can bring healing to the world and to ourselves. True teshuva is not easy, as Rebbe Nachman of Breslov says:

כִּי כָל דְבַר וְדָבָר מֵעֲבוּדַת הַשֵּׁם, כְּשֶׁרוֹצִין לִכְנֹס בְּאוֹתוֹ הַדֶּרֶךְ וְאוֹתוֹ הַעֲבוּדָה, צְרִיכִין לִפְתֹּחַ שָׁם פֶּתַח לִכְנֹס בְּאוֹתוֹ הַדֶּרֶךְ, וְזֶה בְּחִינַת: כָּל הַתְּחִלּוֹת קָשׁוֹת, מִחֲמַת שְׂבִיחַתְהוֹן צְרִיכִין לְשַׁבֵּר וְלִפְתֹּחַ פֶּתַח מְחֻדָּשׁ, עַל-כֵּן קָשָׁה מְאֹד. וְסִגְלַת לֵחַ הַצְּדָקָה – לְהַרְחִיב וְלִפְתֹּחַ הַפֶּתַח יוֹתֵר וְיוֹתֵר, שֶׁכְּשֶׁעוֹשִׂין אֵיזְהוּ פֶּתַח בְּאֵיזֶה עֲבוּדָה וְנוֹתֵנִין צְדָקָה, אֲזִי הַצְּדָקָה פּוֹתַחַת וּמְרַחֶבֶת הַפֶּתַח יוֹתֵר וְיוֹתֵר, כִּי צְדָקָה הִיא הַתְּחִלָּה שֶׁל כָּל הַתְּחִלּוֹת, כִּי הִיא פּוֹתַחַת וּמְרַחֶבֶת כָּל הַפֶּתַחִים כִּנ"ל.

When a person wants to embark upon a particular path and devotion in worshipping God, he needs to make an opening in order to enter that path. This is as in “all beginnings are difficult,” because at the beginning one must break through and open a new entrance. It is therefore very difficult. Yet the remarkable power of charity (*tzedaka*) is that it can widen and open the opening more and more. When we make an opening in some devotion and give charity, the charity opens and widens the opening more and more. This is because charity is the beginning of all beginnings, for it opens and widens all the entrances. (Likutey Moharan II:4:2)

To do teshuva properly we have to open ourselves up as widely as we can. When we choose to give *tzedakah* it requires us to assess the world around us and our priorities. How widely do we give? As we open our hearts and hands to those around us, we make decisions about who is in need. Our choices can widen our community and bring more people together by showing we care. We come together as a community and see each other and ourselves as truly and honestly as we can. This year let us be counter-cultural and come together to do teshuva and make the world a better place together.

Rabba Claudia Marbach received semikha from Maharat in 2018. She is Director of Teen Beit Midrash, an after-school Talmud program for teens in Boston, runs a pop-up beit midrash for women in Boston called One Night Shtender, and co-runs a partnership minyan called Yedid Nefesh in Newton, MA. Rabba Claudia served a middle school teacher at JCDS Boston, a pluralistic Jewish Day School, for fifteen years, where she developed the Rabbinics curriculum and taught tefillah and moral dilemmas. Rabba Claudia received her BA in English from Barnard College, and JD from Boston University. She studied at Michlala, Drisha and Pardes.

¹ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/can_helping_others_help_you_find_meaning_in_life

